Shalamov, Solzhenitsyn, and the Mission of Memory

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THE analytical comparison of the works of Varlam Shalamov and Alexander Solzhenitsyn is an intriguing and complex project, as yet to be comprehensively approached. It is an important undertaking, given their pre-eminence not just among those who write about the camps but also within contemporary Russian literature in general. John Glad has aptly noted that their respective statures in Russian literature bear a striking resemblance to those of Chekhov and Tolstoy at the turn of the century.[1] I intend to limit my discussion to one aspect of comparison: the theme of memory as a moral mission. Both Shalamov's and Solzhenitsyn's works are clearly imperative on the moral need to remember and to record the truth about Stalin's Gulag. However, because their respective missions stem from highly dissimilar sources, we should beware of overrating the significance of the mission of memory as an indication of similarity between the two writers.

It need hardly be emphasized that Solzhenitsyn views memory, that is the preservation of historical truth, as a mission: it is the predominant theme of *The Gulag Archipelago*. Characteristically, Solzhenitsyn expresses the mission in the preface of the first book by quoting a Russian proverb: "Dwell on the past and you'll lose an eye; forget the past and you'll lose both eyes."[2]

Nor does it require great insight to recognize that the source of Solzhenitsyn's sense of mission is his moral wrath, the ferocious righteousness with which he regards the Gulag system and the larger political structure which spawned it. His judgment is based upon an abstract distinction between good and evil, closely tied to religious considerations. Just as Spiridon Danilovich in *The First Circle* recognizes no ambiguity in questions of right and wrong—"I'll tell you: the wolfhound is right and the cannibal is wrong!"—so Solzhenitsyn makes his absolute judgment: telling lies or even keeping quiet about the camps is evil; remembering and telling the world is good.

One very obvious difference between these two authors is that Solzhenitsyn is a crusader, which Shalamov is not. Not only does Solzhenitsyn feel the mission of memory, but his dedication to it has drawn him into non-literary realms of propagandizing and political advocacy. In contrast, Shalamov most emphatically avoided dissident activity and politics in general. While it is difficult to believe that he subscribed to, much less authored, the officialese platitudes of the

[1] Varlam Shalamov, *Graphite*, trans. John Glad. (W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 1981), p. 16.

[2] Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, (Harper & Row, New York, 1973), p. x.

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infamous 1972 letter published in his name in *Literaturnaya Gazeta* ("Some anti-Soviet journals have decided to take advantage of the honest name of a Soviet writer . . ." etc.),[3] in any case it is clear that he was not a crusader like Solzhenitsyn.

However, this does not mean that he did not share the latter's sense of memory from Nadezhda Mandelshtam's description of her search, after the 20th Party Congress, for clues about her husband's fate.[4] Her concern with the moral obligation to remember is apparent in her account of her interviews with ex-*zeks* from the Kolyma who might have some information about Osip's death. She fears that too many former prisoners are suffering from the malaise of her acquaintance Kazarnovsky, whose "memory was like a huge, rancid pancake in which fact and fancy from his prison days had been mixed up together and baked into an inseparable mass."[5] She writes:

> Listening to these accounts, I was horrified at the thought that there might be nobody who could ever properly bear witness to the past. Whether inside or outside the camps, we had all lost our memories.[6]

However, she does add optimistically that "there were people who had made it their aim from the beginning not only to save themselves, but to survive as witnesses."[7] She met a number of these "relentless keepers of the truth," who "came through the ordeal like heroes, not only living to tell the tale but preserving the keenness of memory that enables them to do so."[8] Although she does not name him, Nadezhda Mandelshtam is certainly referring here to Shalamov. The two first met during her investigation into Osip's fate, and, drawn together by their common need to remember, they became close friends until Shalamov's death.

Shalamov has described this bond between Nadezhda Mandelshtam and himself metaphorically in one of his best stories, *Sententious*. Dedicated to her, it is among his most direct treatments of the theme of memory. The story begins:

> People materialized out of nowhere—one after another. A stranger would lie down next to me on my berth and nestle against my bony shoulder in the night, giving me his pitiful warmth and receiving my own in exchange. There were nights when no warmth at all penetrated the rags of my jacket and padded vest, and in the morning I would think my neighbour was dead and be surprised that he would rise in response to a shouted command, get dressed, and submissively obey the order.[9]

[3] "V Redaktsiyu Literaturnoi Gazety," *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, 23 Feb. 1972.

[4] Nadezhda Mandelshtam, *Hope Against Hope*, trans. Max Hayward, (Atheneum, New York, 1983), Chapter 82.

[5] Ibid. p. 379.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid. pp. 378–9.

[9] Varlam Shalamov, *Kolyma Tales*, trans. John Glad, (W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 1980), p. 70.

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At first sight this is a straightforward description of life in a transit camp, it is also an effective metaphor for Nadezhda Mandelshtam's search for clues about Osip's death: one ex-*zek* after another would visit her, share a bit of life and warmth—that is to say, memory—and then "disappear forever in the day." Some gave more warmth, some less: and some, it seemed, had none at all: Kazarnovsky, for example. This opening paragraph ends with what is probably another reference to Mandelshtam's interviewing process:

> I didn't know the people who slept at my side. I never asked them questions. There is an Arab saying: "He who asks no questions will be told no lies." I couldn't have cared less whether I was being told lies or the truth. The camp criminals have a saying which is even more appropriate here—it expresses a deep contempt for the questioner: "If you don't believe it, take it as a fairy tale." I neither asked questions nor listened to fairy tales.[10]

Mandelshtam in her search, of course, did not share this wretched *dokhodiag's* attitude: she both asked and listened.

ALTHOUGH played in a minor key throughout, the theme of memory as a moral duty is present in many of Shalamov's stories. Like Solzhenitsyn, Shalamov feels the moral pressure to record his experiences in order to preserve historical truth. This is clearest in *Lend Lease*, as the narrator describes his sudden realization that "much can be hidden in the folds of the mountain":

> And then I remembered the greedy blaze of the fireweed, the furious blossoming of the taiga in summer when it tried to hide in grass and foliage any deed of man—good or bad. And if I forget, the grass will forget. But the permafrost and the stone will not forget.[11]

Shalamov has set up a neat metaphor here: though in the permafrost the thousands of corpses will never decay, they can be covered by grass and stone; and though the guilt and crimes of Kolyma will always remain, they can be forgotten and covered with falsehood. The grass forgets, and the shiny blade of the American bulldozer bears no traces: human memory is the only way for the truth to be preserved. This moral imperative is also stressed in *The Procurator of Judea*, in which Shalamov compares a young officer's ability, after a determined effort, to forget a particularly cruel incident, to Pilate's ability to forget Christ.

One trouble with remembering, however, is that for the average ex-prisoner it is far more difficult and painful than forgetting. As Nadezhda Mandelshtam notes, for the ex-*zek* "it was all too common to succumb to the temptations to make terms with reality and live out one's life in peace."[12] Shalamov acknowledges this reality. His own experience has taught him that:

[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid. p. 180.
[12] Mandelshtam, *op. cit.* p. 379.

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> . . . a human being survives by his ability to forget. Memory is always ready to blot out the bad and retain only the good.[13]

Shalamov is altogether far more tolerant than Solzhenitsyn of his fellow *zeks* who lack the strength to remember. This explains why his treatment of the mission of memory is subdued in comparison with Solzhenitsyn's. For Shalamov the moral imperative is not absolute, nor externally imposed: any individual might recognize and understand it, but then again he might not. Indeed, at times Shalamov, far from censuring them, seems to envy those who can forget, since he knows that he himself cannot. Remembering is terrible for all ex-*zeks*; but for those who feel the mission of memory, forgetting is even more terrible. Shalamov obviously includes himself in the latter group. As he concludes in *The Seizure*, one of the very few stories set after the narrator's release from camp:

> The doctor asked me something, and I answered with difficulty. I was not afraid of memories.[14]

As mentioned above, Solzhenitsyn's mission of memory is closely tied to abstract moral criteria, which in turn are the product of the spiritual purification or "ascent" which he experienced in camp. It is a curious paradox, freely acknowledged by Solzhenitsyn, that he owes his enlightened perspective, his monopoly on truth, to the very system he so profoundly hates. Shalamov, by contrast, experienced no such ascent, nor any beneficial side effects from life in the camp. He states his position simply and unequivocally:

> The camps are a negative school of life in every respect. Nobody will ever learn anything useful or valuable from them.[15]

Shalamov has based his understanding of the mission of memory upon quite different considerations.

SHALAMOV'S camp experience is distinct from those of other Gulag writers in one essential respect—other writers describe their good fortunes in escaping prolonged stints on general work assignments in the mines or the forest by procuring some kind of privileged occupation. Solzhenitsyn made it into Mavrino *sharaga*, for example, and Evgenia Ginzburg worked as a doctor, teacher, piano player, etc. Shalamov did not seek such positions. Though he was eventually trained and worked as a medical assistant, for years on end he remained on the general work details, evidently as a matter of principle. As a result of the unimaginable brutality of the work in the Kolyma, he came to understand a world which other writers only report at second hand: the world of the *dokhodiagi*, or "goners." Most of Shalamov's tales portray camp life

[13] Shalamov, *Kolyma Tales*, p. 66.
[14] Shalamov, *Graphite*, p. 167.
[15] The quotation is from Geoffrey Hosking's translation. "The Ultimate Circle of the Stalinist Inferno." *New Universities Quarterly*, Vol. 34, Spring 1980, p. 162; John Glad's translation is slightly different: see *Graphite*, p. 195.

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through the eyes of these wretches, this wasted human slag spewn out of the gold and lead mines; and it is this perspective which chiefly accounts for the extraordinary power and horror of his work.

This perspective also shaped Shalamov's vision of the nature of life and death. Central to the author's philosophical outlook is the idea that man is not faced with a simple choice between life and death, but with a spectrum or continuum of infinitely fine gradations between the two. At one end is full, human life, and at the other is death; but in between there is a descending scale of moral and even physical states which are neither. In the Kolyma it doesn't take long for the work, cold, hunger and humiliation to reduce any man to something less than human, and then further to something less than alive—but not yet dead. These lowest nether regions of existence, far closer to death than to life, are the realm of the *dokhodiagi*. Like Zeno's runner, they approach infinitesimally close, within one spoonful of *kasha*, to death—until there is practically no difference between their technically living bodies at one instant and their corpses at the next.

For Shalamov, existence in the Kolyma consists of constant motion along this continuum, either towards death or away from it. Luck and misfortune are marked by changes in direction: setbacks or recoveries, relapses or miracles. The concept of motion between life and death is best illustrated by such stories as *Dominoes*, *Condensed Milk*, *Carpenters*, *Shock Therapy*, and *Sententious*. In the last, the narrator describes the sensation of moving back away from death:

> But death, just recently so near, began to ease away little by little. Death was replaced not by life, but by semi-consciousness, an existence which had no formula and could not be called life.[16]

Shalamov's vision of life and death is closely tied to his peculiar animism (John Glad calls it "pantheistic surrealism")[17] which is especially visible in his descriptions of nature, clearest of all in *Fire and Water*, where the dreamlike, almost mystical images of nature are reminiscent of Prishvin or Grin; but animism is pervasive in his work. Inanimate objects or flora are constantly anthropomorphized: "Trees in the north die lying down—like people,"[18] or "The terrible muscular strength of the water was like that of a wrestler."[19] For Shalamov, the distinction between organic and inorganic, alive and dead, animal and vegetable, man and beast are by no means clear or constant:

> After all, a stone is not born a stone, but a soft, oily creature. A creature, and not a thing. A stone becomes a thing in old age.[20]
>
> Even a stone didn't seem dead to me, not to mention the grass, the

[16] *Kolyma Tales*, p. 70.
[17] *Graphite*, p. 17.
[18] *Kolyma Tales*, p. 62.
[19] *Graphite*, p. 101.
[20] *Kolyma Tales*, p. 176.

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> trees, the river. The river was not only the incarnation of life, but life itself. It possessed eternal movement, calm, a silent and secret language of its own . . .[21]

Even the taiga is portrayed as a living organism, able at times to avenge evil (as in *Tamara the Bitch*), but nonetheless a "green procurator" in league with the prisoners' tormentors. And of course the prisoners, at various stages of un-death, are constantly compared to horses, dogs, dwarf cedars, tundra grass, even stones. Shalamov's belief that the same set of rules applies to all these equally is simply a result of his own observations: after all, the *dokhodiag* passes through stages between life and death in which he really does resemble these things more than a human being.

IF the prisoners' existence in the Kolyma consists of constant motion towards or away from death, what is it that marks or measures that motion? Certainly, it is partly the physical condition of the *zek*: Shalamov offers ample detail of the scurvy, frostbite, emaciation and exhaustion which are symptoms of the lower end of the spectrum. But he consistently suggests that the worst symptom of the most dangerous stages of deterioration is psychological: the loss of consciousness of one's own humanity, which is in the profoundest sense a loss of memory. All the most desperate goners in Shalamov's tales are characterized by their lack of humanity:

> All human emotions—love, friendship, envy, concern for one's fellow man, compassion, honesty, longing for fame—had left us with the flesh that had melted from our bodies during their long fasts.[22]

But what is important is the fact that not just the emotions themselves, but even the concept that such feelings exist is lost to the goners. Thus in *Condensed Milk* what is so remarkable and moving is not the narrator's refusal to share his two cans of milk, but the fact that the very idea, the very possibility that anyone might ever share anything, never occurs to him or to his comrades.

> "Let's have a spoon," said Shestakov, turning to the labourers surrounding us. Licked clean, ten glistening spoons were stretched out over the table. Everyone stood and watched as I ate. No one was indelicate about it, nor was there the slightest expectation that they might be allowed to participate. None of them could even hope that I would share this milk with them. Such things were unheard of. . . . I sat down so as to be more comfortable and drank the milk without any bread, washing it down from time to time with cold water. I finished both cans. The audience disappeared. . . . The show was over.[23]

For Shalamov, the state of one's memory is the most crucial barometer of

[21] Ibid. p. 123.
[22] *Ibid. p. 56.*
[23] Ibid. p. 184.

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progress or regress along the spectrum between life and death. Memory disappears progressively as a prisoner moves into the realm of the *dokhodiag*, which is to say closer to death (incidentally, Evgenia Ginzburg also noticed this phenomenon, though at second-hand);[24] and as he recovers it begins to resurface. The process of the recovery of memory—and not just the simple memory of words and facts, but of sensations, emotions, one's very humanity—is especially directly examined in *Sententious* and *Dominoes*. In the latter, the narrator is brought to the hospital as a chronic *dokhodiag*:

> I could only pronounce words slowly and with difficulty, as if translating from a foreign language. I had forgotten everything. I didn't even remember what it was like to remember.[25]

In the hospital he is given humane treatment and brought back to life. The ultimate proof of his recovery is presented at the very end of the story, as he detects in himself the return of a capacity for shame at not having thought to share his bread or cigarette with a fellow patient.

Sententious focuses on a change of direction in the narrator's existence, a turn away from death and towards recovery. The *zek*'s recovery is characterized by the return of his memory of various features of his humanity: first a consciousness of the groans and wheezing of his barrack mates, then a "reduced need for sleep, forgetfulness, unconsciousness"; then pain, fear, envy, and pity for animals. Later still, culture begins to return, symbolized by the educated vocabulary which the narrator had long forgotten. One word, "sententious," appeared first in his mind.

> "Sententious! Sententious!"
> I roared with laughter.
> "Sententious!" I shouted directly to the northern sky, into the double dawn, still not understanding the meaning of the word that had been born within me. And if the word had returned, then all the better! A great joy filled me.[26]

The source of this joy is the narrator's awareness of his returning memory, an indication of his return to human life.

IT is clear that Shalamov is concerned with memory in two distinct ways: on the one hand, rather as Solzhenitsyn sees it—as a moral mission, a duty to historical truth; and on the other, as a symptom of humanity, which he has observed at first hand over many years of horrifying experience. Put this way it is clear that these are not distinct ideas, but two faces of the same one—or rather, one is the direct product of the other, a moral conclusion drawn from empirical evidence. Shalamov understands the mission of memory precisely *because* he has seen with his own eyes what an essential component of human life it is. He

[24] See for example Ginzburg's description of Elena Nikolaevna Sulimova in *Within the Whirlwind*, (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York, 1981), p. 20.
[25] *Graphite*, p. 49.
[26] *Kolyma Tales*, pp. 74–5.

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knows that he must remember because he has seen what it means to forget.

This leads to the difference between the sources of Shalamov's and Solzhenitsyn's missions: Solzhenitsyn's arises from his idealism (not to say mysticism), his preoccupation with ethereal, absolute Truth; while Shalamov's is materialistic, arising from years of observation of concrete phenomena in the real, though extraordinarily inhumane, world. Naturally, this difference is partly a reflection of the difference in experience of the two writers. Solzhenitsyn, as is often noted, never sank to nearly the level of degradation which Shalamov knew in the camps, while Shalamov never experienced the spiritual "ascent" which so profoundly influenced Solzhenitsyn's idealist perspective. This idealist/materialist contrast is also generally relevant to many of the differences between the authors' thematic concerns and prose styles—which, as Geoffrey Hoskings has rightly observed, are about as different as it is possible to imagine.[27]

As noted above, a more comprehensive critical comparison of these two outstanding writers remains to be undertaken. Such a study might focus on the paradoxical areas where their superficial similarities actually result from or imply more profound differences. The theme of memory as a mission is one such area.

[27] Hoskings, op. cit. p. 162.

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